

The Beginnings of a Theoretical Framework: Weaving the Entanglements of My Thinking

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Introduction

As a first year PhD student in the middle of my doctoral seminar, I was tasked with the assignment to map out my theoretical framework. Over the past few months, I had been questioning myself with a deafening self-doubt; I often felt like an outsider in the PhD program—an imposter within a place of privilege loaded with responsibility. Struggling to place my thoughts and words on paper, I had a conversation with the seminar's instructor and was struck by her words of advice to “weave together ideas from what you're reading” (personal communication, P. Whitty, February 8, 2018). As she spoke, I began to picture the motion of weaving, and my thoughts and the theories I have been reading began to slow down, falling into a place of cohesion and understanding. A framework was beginning to form; the design and movement of weaving calmed me.

Slivered Memories, Woven with Meaning

I walked away from this conversation bewildered as to why the mention of weaving soothed me. The feeling of being haunted by a vague idea as an unknowable nagging awareness pulled until slivered memories of my grandmother playing with fabrics came to me. Needing to know more, I visited my mother and, over coffee, we shared childhood memories of my maternal grandmother creating with fabrics. As my mother and I reminisced, visions of the room in which my grandmother worked came flooding back to

me: one wall of windows cast a spotlight on twirling fairies, one wall with a closet holding mysteries that played at the boundaries of possibilities, and the other two walls held floor-to-ceiling shelves containing compartments bursting with inviting, colorful fibers. This was a place of enchantment, magic, and calm. I would sit on the floor beside my grandmother as she created, dividing my gaze between her story-filled hands elegantly moving and the vibrant wall of fibers. It seemed my present-day weaving took me back to my home in the domestic space of my grandmother's work, a piece of my identity I am working to reclaim; "Remembrances of childhood are ... a source of pedagogical understanding. They give substance to the picture of the present. They provide a more detailed story than we presently understand. They are in some profound way formative of present knowledge" (Smith, 1991, p. 159). Sitting with my excitement about weaving led me to slivered memories, threaded with meanings I needed to hear.

Being in those moments with my grandmother's hands are the closest I will ever be to her. For a plethora of deeply seeded reasons, cloaked in bitter clouds of uncertainty, I am left yearning for my grandmother's love, for her hands to love me today as they so clearly loved those fibers. Revisiting these moments of *nearly* love and calm with my grandmother, her hands, and the fibers allowed me to reconcile with my anxieties of the task; I was open to begin creating with the entanglements of my thinking.

Creating New Understandings: Creating Order of Chaos

The seminar and assignments were designed to give room for students to follow their own learning journeys, and we were encouraged to represent our learning in a variety of ways. I was not obligated to force my thoughts into the often straightforward and constrained written paper. I could inject my imagination, creativity, and dramatic flair into a representation of my own learning desires

(Shalaby, 2017). The option of a research paper felt an unnatural place for the chaotic weavings of my ideas and readings embroidered in a rhizomatic world “of a dynamic, ever-changing ‘becoming’” (MacNaughton, 2004, p. 93). The creative process of weaving invited a return to desire and longing within familial relationships—a journey that deepens my educational thinking.

My appreciation of art as “a lively process of engagement with a range of materials—an engagement that is sensual and reflective, creative and deliberate, and that deepens and extends [our] learning” (Pelo, 2007, p. 1) felt like a more authentic way of being with this assignment. Composing with fabrics as I roamed amidst my learnings carried the growth of my theoretical framework. My play with an arts-informed methodology opened “a way of redefining research form and representation and creating new understandings of process, spirit, purpose, subjectivities, emotion, responsiveness, and the ethical dimensions of inquiry” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 59)—this was not about the art itself but about creating relationships and new understandings. It was “about much more than [an] uncanny product. It is a doing in itself, an entanglement with the materiality of memory capable of shifting the world’s “pattern of sedimented unfoldings”” (Barad, 2014, p. 182).

The physical creation of the weave helped me to (re)organize my ideas, and even though the weave itself may appear messy and disorganized, this weave and all its pieces represent an order to the chaos of my thoughts and understandings.



Figure 1. Photo of weave (own photo).

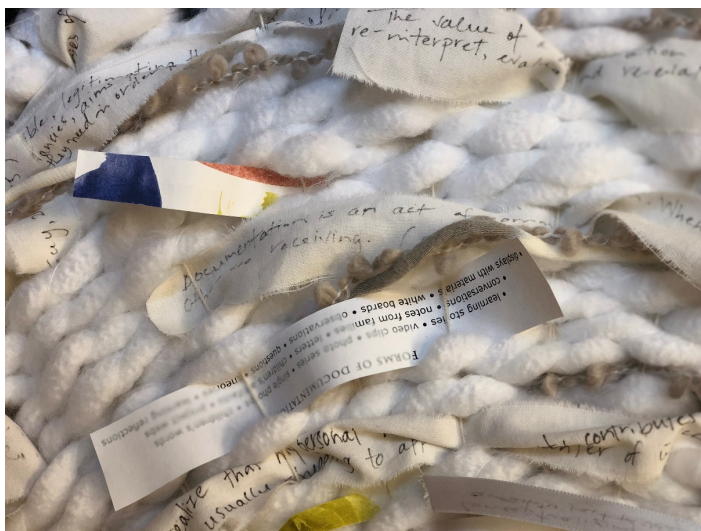


Figure 2. Close up of weave (own photo).

Weaving: Entangled Relationships

All aspects of the weave's creation are intentional. The circular shape of the weave symbolizes the state of myself as a researcher; I am not sure where or when my journey as a researcher began but also know there will be no end.

The handle has been created with quotes from scholars that stand out for me as an early childhood educator-researcher. "Other people's words are the bridge you use to cross from where you were to wherever you're going" (Smith, 2009, p. 102); "we borrow other people's words until we find our own" (Fletcher, 2016 as cited in Rief, 2018). The words of others will help support and brace me throughout my educator-researcher journey.

The middle of the weave holds snippets of literature, conversations, curricula, and representations coming together to

form my theoretical framework. There is grey string woven throughout the weave holding space for readings I have not read and knowledges and ideas yet to come. Along this journey, it is important to me that I keep the children, their families, and my colleagues at the forefront of my thinking and in the heart of my weave, helping to keep me grounded in early childhood education. Early childhood educators are present through the strips of our *New Brunswick Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care ~ English*. Families are symbolized with pieces of photocopied notes and messages they have written. The children are visible with pieces of artwork, their contributions to this weaving. My relationship with children, their families, and my colleagues plays a critical role in my research, just as the entanglements of my embodied stories. It is essential to me as an early childhood educator-researcher that I embrace myself as an inter/in/dependent learner—embracing an ethic of care (Noddings, 2003) and my response-abilities with/in the entanglements of my being (Kuby, 2019):

To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating. (Barad as cited in Gamble & Hanan, 2016, p. 265)

The entanglements of humans, non-humans, and more-than-humans create a wholeness not identifiable by the fabrics of my individual pieces, but as a new whole (Kuby, 2019).

Threads of Theoretical Strengths

Initially, I began with seven threads holding my curiosities of the complex relationships early childhood educators have with

families in the classroom. As I read, however, my research shifted, and I have been drawn to examining how pedagogical documentation in early childhood can be used to create more equitable relationships between educators, children and families, and early childhood center directors. And as my thinking has changed, so too has the weave. I now have a basket of threads that have been removed since altering the path of my research and adjusting the theoretical framework. This basket will stay nearby reminding me that not all I read will be used to answer my dissertation question, but it is knowledge nonetheless, always ready for a new line of inquiry.



Figure 3. Photo of threads removed from weave in basket (own photo).

The now six main threads for my theoretical framework are woven and intertwined on pieces of fabric holding handwritten

quotes from academic scholars with whom I am currently conversing: the works of Grumet (1988), Delpit (1995), Noddings (2003), Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003), Hughes and MacNaughton (2000), Stacey (2015), and Stremmel (2012) can be found within the weave. Nel Noddings' ethic of care (2003) is one of the main threads of my theoretical framework, "every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring... It establishes the climate, a first approximation to the range of acceptable practices, and a lens through which all practices and possible practices are examined" (p. 172-173). It is not enough for me to claim to care for others. Children, their families, and my colleagues, have to feel my love, generosity, and empathy (Acevedo, 2018).

Another thread within my framework comes from Grumet (1988) and Delpit (1995) and their work of how adults often treat other people's children differently. Families need opportunities to get to know other children in their child's life, to build stronger bonds and open their hearts with greater understanding and empathy. Though there can often be clashes between school culture and home culture, potentially creating places of misunderstanding, educators should look to families as allies and co-educators, involving families in the everyday events of the learning community. In order for families to be more involved in the classroom, the knowledge-power relations embedded in educator-family communications (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000) craves to be addressed, a third thread in my theoretical framework woven throughout. Educator knowledge is not more important than family knowledge. Spaces in classroom environments need to be opened for families to share their insights and guidance about their children.

Instituting open and genuine dialogue implies weakening of professional structures and an attempt to establish teachers

and parents as cooperative educators. In order to establish the level of trust and understanding that is required for open dialogue, we might consider a reorganization of schooling to provide extended contact between teachers and students. (Noddings, 2003, p. 186)

To create opportunities for dialogues and possible reorganization of schooling as Noddings suggests, a major shift in the value schools and educators place on parental engagement would have to occur (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Educators will have to embrace the discomfort of questioning their own practice and identity as they shift their attitude away from seeing families as intruders, competitors, or enemies (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003).

The questioning of practice and identities carries with it an acknowledgement of the unconscious attitudes (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003) in the classroom, a fourth thread of the framework. These unconscious attitudes loom between the classroom walls as ghosts; family passion in defense of their child may also be in defense of the child they once were (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Layered with the respect of family ghosts, educators will also have to “recognize the autobiographical and ancestral roots” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p. 7) they bring to the classroom air.

Pedagogical documentation, a fifth thread of the framework, “is not a simple process. Yet it has the power to sustain and inspire us and to support the growth of everyone who is involved with it” (Stacey, 2015, p. 95). Growth of the entwined relationships within the learning community can be encouraged and heartened through documentation; “Together, pondering and discussing your interests, wonderings, and curiosities can lead to great insights and new understandings” (Stremmel, as cited in Stacey, 2015, p. 86).

One of the main goals for me as an educator is “...creating a classroom space that will respect the students' need for autonomy and privacy and honor the sanctity of their secrets” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p. 18), a sixth thread to my theoretical framework. Children have rights; they have a right to respect, a right to privacy, and a right to feel validated. These spaces of the learning environments are built with respectful and responsive relationships between children and adults, helping to create communities of reciprocity and equity. Individual learning journeys have their own path; children are encouraged to represent their learning in a variety of ways with ample time for discussion, reflection, and revision. Resources of all sorts are accessible throughout the learning spaces for play and exploration. Discussions are open and supportive, helping create opportunities to grow and deepen knowledge and experiences.

The weave's frame is wrapped with discussions and ideas from my selection of readings that challenge my pedagogy. These are issues with values, practices, and beliefs that I will need to trouble through my research: What are the strengths of boundaries in a classroom? What are the benefits and limitations of boundaries? How might they be more fluid and flexible to meet the many needs of families? How do we trouble and reconstruct in many varied iterations what it means to be an “appropriately involved parent” (Stooke, 2014, p. 70)?

Conclusion

“Creating and nurturing and inventing gave [me] a sense of control and safety and stability” (Warner, 2018, p. 24).

Having the threads of my theoretical framework in a design where I reshape the entanglements of my thinking welcomes the chaos of ideas and thoughts. With a deeper respect and understanding now of how

[l]ife is lived and knowledge is made through kitchen table conversations and yarnin’ at the wharf or transit station or coffee shop or tavern, in the imaginative spaces created between the lines of a good book or an encounter with an evocative photograph, in an embodied response to a musical composition or interpretive dance. (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 59)

I will continue to endure revisiting the domestic spaces of my past to reclaim those threads of my identity. Reclaiming threads of my identity, together with caring for my relationships with children, families, and colleagues, my tapestry will transform as I continue to read, deepening my knowledge, redefining my relational responsibilities, and unraveling a research question.

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